

“The religious journeys of Tony Cross and the future of Unitarian Christianity and spirituality”

An Address given by Rev'd. Alex Bradley

at Brook Street Chapel Knutsford 21 July 2019

Readings Mark 12.28-31 ‘The two great commandments’

Robert Frost: ‘The road not taken’

The great German novelist and poet, Goethe, some of whose words I quoted at the beginning of our service, once said to a preacher: ‘Do not give us your doubts, but give us your certainties, for we have doubts enough of our own’. I think I am too much of a Unitarian not to share a few of my doubts with you from time to time but I hope that I give you some of my spiritual and intellectual affirmations as well, if not always certainties, from time to time.

I remember reading one of Somerset Maugham’s novels, ‘Of Human Bondage’ for the first time, and finding myself both amused and bemused by this dialogue between the protagonist Philip and his friend Weeks. Weeks is asked what his religion is. “I’ve been trying to find that out for years. I think I’m a Unitarian.” “But that’s a dissenter,” said Philip... “I don’t quite know what a Unitarian is,” ... Weeks in his odd way again put his head on one side: you almost expected him to twitter.

“A Unitarian very earnestly disbelieves in almost everything that anybody else believes, and he has a very lively sustaining faith in he doesn’t quite know what.””

Well, of course, I fell about laughing on reading these words, but later on in more serious mode, I came to think that it illustrated very well something of the dilemma facing our denomination.

All this begs the question (dare I say it, the hoary chestnut) as to ‘what exactly is a Unitarian?’ Since I have about fifteen minutes rather than five years to spare here today, I am going to give a fast definition which I hope will serve us for our purposes. Unitarianism is, classically, the belief that there is only person in the Godhead. God is a Unity. Hence Unitarian Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and some Hindus, are all Unitarians in the theological sense. Many of ‘our’ Unitarians, most of those in Transylvania and perhaps a majority here in Britain,

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including in our own chapel, continue to base their worship on the teachings of Jesus and the Christian tradition. However, in certain British Unitarian churches and particularly our churches in North America, the term ‘Unitarian’ has often come to signify an approach that is closer to Humanism with a capital H, without any reference to God, Jesus, or even spirituality of any kind.

Thus, the word ‘Unitarian’ is no longer defined by any beliefs, however open or liberal, but only by process, principles or values. The overall picture is complex but the trend towards a more secular position seems clear. From being a

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Christian denomination that welcomed people with doubts about God into their fellowship, it has become, in some places, a movement that is strongly non-Christian, or even anti-Christian, or even hostile to religion itself.

At one end of the Unitarian spectrum, there is even a church that advertises itself as ‘a non-religious church’. I want to affirm clearly that they have an absolute right to do so, just as we at Brook Street have an absolute right to call ourselves a Christian congregation. Our freedom is precious to all of us as Unitarians and that includes the freedom to take different paths. That point being firmly made, I personally find it hard to see much difference between a church that calls itself ‘non-religious’ and a Sunday Assembly gathering, except that the Sunday Assembly movement does not call itself a church.

Just under a fortnight ago, I attended an Anglo-Catholic funeral mass in Oxford of a man called Tony Cross. He was born and died an Anglo-Catholic: however, in the course of his life he converted to Roman Catholicism twice (the first period he called ‘his ‘Roman holiday’!) and he came into Unitarianism twice. He was a significant figure in our denomination. He had ministries in several of our Unitarian churches and served for a while as the Principal of what is now Harris Manchester College, one of the colleges charged with the training of future Unitarian ministers. The hymn book we are using today [Hymns of Faith and Freedom] was largely the product of his editing. Listening to the twists and turns of his church life, he might sound like a modern-day Vicar of Bray, but that would be an unfair comparison. I think his whole life was a deeply personal and sincere pilgrimage, if a somewhat troubled one. He is a largely forgotten figure now, but when I was coming into Unitarianism in the 1980s, he was seen by many as one of its defining figures. He was on the ‘classical’ theist wing, as opposed to his one-time close friend and fellow minister Keith Gilley, who sought to move it in a more secular direction. Both had bushy beards that made them look a little like well-groomed Old Testament prophets. Both were charismatic individuals who could sway a congregation or audience. For some people, they were ‘Marmite’ figures both: you either loved them or couldn’t stand them. I was in neither camp. I thought that they both had some good points, although I leaned much more to Tony Cross’s viewpoint. Both had worked together in the past, especially in groups campaigning for acceptance for gay people. Tony Cross was himself a gay man and his Anglo-Catholic

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funeral mass spoke of this clearly and openly. It was a heartening and inspiring experience to attend a funeral in an Anglican church where a person's life could be fully shared and celebrated without concealment or deceit. It was also a timely reminder that we Unitarians and Free Christians are not the only liberals. There are liberals in all faiths, and in the ranks of the 'nones'.

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At about the time I came into Unitarianism, the denomination published a series of leaflets entitled ‘A Personal View of Unitarianism’. I remember reading all of them, including the one by Tony Cross, and thinking to myself, if this man could be a Unitarian with these views, then perhaps I, whose theology, then as now, was much less conservative, perhaps I, too, could be a Unitarian. By one of those twists of fate, that life throws up sometimes, I ended up working alongside him as a co-minister for a year in one of our churches. His theology was impeccably liberal Christian and Unitarian but his style of worship showed signs of his erstwhile Anglo-Catholicism.

Tony Cross was an admittedly controversial figure but a great deal of the opposition that he faced was undeserved and even occasionally outrageously narrow-minded and sectarian. He left Unitarianism for the Catholic Church in the mid-1990s but some of the questions he raised are still live issues. The tendency towards humanism that he identified has moved much further forward, to the extent that the Christian roots of our tradition are sometimes often not only downplayed but even disowned and denigrated. If we claim to be tolerant, yet we disparage the very religion from which we have come, then perhaps we deserve to be prosecuted under the Trades Descriptions Act!

Our chapels and churches are self-governing, independent bodies, which is why we at Brook Street became Unitarian in the 18th Century. It is also why our congregations have taken so many different paths, some like us remaining Christian in our life and worship, others rejecting Christianity, or even religion altogether. The question for our own chapel is, I believe, how we maintain and strengthen our own spiritual life and worship and preserve our Christian ethos, while always keeping ourselves open to truth from wherever it comes.

The Christian tradition is not just about our history, important though that history is. It is about our present time and our future. When you get on a train, your primary wish is to know where it is going, rather than where it has come from. If the train is suddenly diverted en route, without notice or warning, to Stockport, when you expected to get off at Crewe, where your wife was waiting to pick you up (this actually happened to me on one occasion), it might be the same physical train but it's not performing the function you want from it. In that

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sense, it is very definitely NOT the same train, that was meant to be going to Crewe. Some Unitarian ‘trains’ seemed to be going to different destinations to the places advertised on the destination indicators on the platforms. That was fine if those were places where you wanted to go. It’s not quite so good otherwise. We need to know where the train is going so that we can choose whether we want to go there, or not!

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So, what are some of my own spiritual and intellectual affirmations about religion in general and the Unitarian tradition in particular?

I am someone who is by inclination a sceptic, something of a ‘doubting Thomas’, a person who is ‘once-born’ rather than twice-born. Thus, I find it inspiring that the Bible itself voices the radical doubt of the anonymous writer of the book of Ecclesiastes about whether life has any meaning, expressed in the famous phrase ‘vanity of vanities, all is vanity’. I find it inspiring that the Bible speaks of the human condition in all its variety. It speaks of the pain of loss in the book of Job. By way of contrast, it expresses in vivid terms the ecstasy of human passion and love in the Song of Songs. It is precisely for reasons such as those, that I have come to value the Christian tradition, and the Unitarian version of Christianity in particular, more and more as my thinking has developed over the years and my spirituality has evolved and changed.

Religion is not simply a matter of doctrine and belief. There are many other dimensions to religion. Ritual and culture, historical background and practice, are particularly important. The history of our liberties dates back to the turmoil of the Reformation when men and women could read the Bible in their own language for the first time, and make their own judgements, without having to rely on a monopolistic church and priesthood to tell them what it actually said. It was a quantum leap for religious freedom and, ultimately political and economic freedom. The Bible is many-sided, with layers of meaning and nuance: we find a cry for social and economic justice in the 8th century prophets Amos and Hosea, and a cry for freedom in the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Like the 18th century French philosophe Voltaire, (one of my heroes) who was very definitely not a Christian, I think that even if God did not exist, we would have to invent him. As it happens, I do believe in God, albeit perhaps in an unorthodox sense: I believe in a God who is the transcendent reality behind all that exists.

Secondly, while I respect, revere even, many of the insights from faiths other than my own, particularly Buddhism, I do not think that they all ‘teach the same thing’. Still less do I think that we should attempt to put together a synthetic world religion that claims to embrace all of them. It is both intellectually

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untenable, and frankly, a bit of a cheek, to imply that we understand those religions as well as their adherents. It is hard enough to get to grips with our own at times! Trying to make a synthetic new religion is rather like taking a huge jigsaw puzzle where, instead of putting together all the pieces from one corner to form the image in that particular corner, you take some colourful pieces from the

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middle, and other pieces that take your fancy from all the other three corners and you put all those nice but disparate pieces in that fourth corner, and then expect them to fit together neatly and make a nice picture. They will not properly fit, indeed they cannot properly fit, because they do not belong there!

A religion is not just a collection of philosophical, theological and ethical teachings. It is a nexus of culture, ritual and piety, often deeply personal and familial. I believe that all the great faiths contain eternal truths although in their outer form they are human constructs. I do not believe that any of them, including my Christian faith, contain the absolute truth. They are all part of a bigger picture.

I believe that inter-religious dialogue can become more meaningful and fruitful when we affirm our Christian basis, precisely because we then have something positive to bring to the encounter of the different faiths and their many kinds of religious experience.

My third religious affirmation today is that a faith is not so much about being but more about action. It is only when I start to put my faith, however hesitantly and imperfectly, into action that it becomes real. Otherwise, all the religions are like Pullman car trains with their gleaming liveries and their luxurious interiors. They may be beautiful to look at and they may have excellent engines but if they do not leave the platform, they are trains without a purpose. They will not be going anywhere! Their function as a train, namely, to go from a to b, or even c, is non-existent. The same principle applies to religion in all its forms. Is it going anywhere and is it achieving anything?

If I give some items of food to a charity like Hope Central, that is a prayer in action. If I give just £5 or whatever I can afford to a charity or worthy cause, my religion becomes not just ‘spiritual’ but material as well. If I make the effort to care for another person, I follow in the spirit of Jesus.

Which road will you take? Centuries ago, our Presbyterian and Unitarian forebears took a road less travelled. Where will we travel? I know that I took what, for me, seemed a huge personal decision three decades ago when I joined the Unitarians.

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I took the road that eventually brought me to where I am today. Who knows what the future may hold, both for me and for you? Tony Cross made his path and he chose different roads at different times of his life. Each of us has our own spiritual journeys and each will be different. Our Unitarian tradition gives the freedom to explore each in our own way, while our roots in Christian spirituality and devotion give us the grounding to spread our wings and share in community. These are some of my affirmations. In the freedom of the truth, it is for each of us to work out our own. Amen.